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ABSTRACT

This brief discusses the benefits of small schools and whether schools can be too small. For years, it was thought that larger schools could offer more comprehensive instructional programs of greater quality at lower costs than smaller schools. However, recent research indicates that larger may not be better, and that smaller schools may in fact be more productive and effective. Benefits include better attendance, lower dropout rates, better student attitudes, increased academic accomplishment, fewer discipline problems, increased adult connections, less cost per student, increased extracurricular activities, increased parental support, and better safety. However, can schools be too small? Studies have demonstrated that, ideally, high schools should have between 600 and 900 students. Research also supports earlier findings that school size is especially important for the most disadvantaged students. (Contains 12 references.) (DFR)

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Jan McComb, Committee Administrator

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Jan McComb, Committee Administrator

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Small Schools

School sizes have increased

Since World War II, the number of schools in the United States has declined 70 percent, while the average size grew fivefold. More than one in four secondary schools nationwide enroll over 1,000 students, and enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are not uncommon.

Many researchers trace the large-school trend to a 1967 book written by James Bryant Conant, then-president of Harvard. In it he concluded that larger schools (over 750 students) can offer more comprehensive instructional programs of greater quality at lower costs than smaller schools.

Research indicates that small schools may be better

However, recent research indicates that larger may not be better. Several studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s established that small schools are more productive and effective than large ones. A higher percentage of students, particularly disadvantaged students, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities and learn more and better in small schools.[1]

Some researchers believe that no secondary school should serve more than 1,000 students and elementary schools should not exceed 300-400 students.[2]

Can schools be too small? Researchers Valerie Lee and Julia Smith analyzed student performance data and school size. Their findings suggest that, ideally, high schools should have between 600 and 900 students. Their research also supports earlier findings that school size is especially important for the most disadvantaged students.[3]

How big are schools in Oregon?

In Oregon, 83 high schools enroll more than 800 students; four schools enroll more than 2,000 students. The biggest, Westview High School in Beaverton, has an enrollment of 2,323.[4]

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[1] Howley, Craig. *Ongoing Dilemmas of School Size: A Short Story*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. December 1996. Howley (1994) reports evidence that students in high socioeconomic status communities perform better in larger schools. Small size seems to benefit minority and low-income students more than middle-and upper-class students.

[2] Prescriptions for size vary. Some researchers cite 400 students, while others conclude that high school students learn best when enrollment is between 600 and 900. A joint policy statement issued by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals recommended that high schools break into units of no more than 600 students.. Howley (1996) suggests that school size might vary from place to place, with small schools emphasized in impoverished areas.

[3] Lee, Valerie and Julia Smith. *High School Size: Which Works Best and for Whom?* Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. Fall 1997, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 205-227.

[4] Oregon Department of Education 1999-00 enrollment figures.

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Oregon School Sizes 1999-2000

	Total # of schools	# of schools over ideal[5]	% of schools over ideal	total # of students	# students over ideal	% of students in schools over ideal
Elementary	742	298	40%	259,339	154,987	59.8%
Middle	197	27	14%	107,868	25,058	23.2%
High	198	83	42%	157,425	117,367	74.55%

Benefits Of Small Schools

Attendance

Research has shown that students from smaller schools have better attendance rates and that when students move from large schools to smaller ones their attendance improves.[6]

Dropout rates

Nationally, smaller schools have lower dropout rates. Oregon statistics are mixed, but do not take into account other factors, such as number of non-English speaking students. The average dropout rate for high schools with more than 1,000 students is 6.39 percent; for schools with 500-999 students, it is 6.62 percent; for schools with 200-499 students it is 5.66 percent; and for schools with less than 200 students, the dropout rate is 3.47 percent.[7]

Attitudes

Student attitudes are better in small schools, including both personal and academic self-concepts. Students in small schools experience a much greater sense of belonging and a higher quality of interpersonal relations. Administrator and teacher attitudes toward work indicate that large schools appear to promote negative teacher perceptions of school administration and low staff morale. In small schools, teachers are more likely to participate in planning and analyze practice, and are likely to expend extra efforts to ensure that the students achieve and the school succeeds.[8]

Academic accomplishment

Research has found a strong negative relationship linking students' academic accomplishment and school size: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels.[9] Smaller schools are easier to restructure with reform strategies and may serve as models for successful change. Small schools are often credited with innovations such as multi-age classrooms, peer tutoring, and individualized instruction. In addition, accountability is enhanced when everyone knows how a student is performing academically.

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[5] "Ideal" defined as 400 students for elementary schools, 800 students for middle schools, and 800 for high schools. Research generally looks at elementary and secondary schools, not middle schools.

[6] Cotton, K., *Affective and Social Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling*, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, December 1996.

[7] Calculations based on figures found in the Oregon Department of Education document, *Dropout Report. Appendix B: Oregon Public School Dropouts, 1996-97 By Size of School.*

[8] Ibid.

[9] Howley, C., *The academic effectiveness of small-scale schooling* (an update), ERIC Digest, Charleston, WV: Eric Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

Discipline problems

Smaller schools have fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by Stockard and Mayberry[10] stated that behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is cancelled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment.

Extracurricular activities

Students in smaller schools are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Researchers point out that in small schools everyone is needed to populate teams, offices, and clubs, and that even shy and less able students are encouraged to participate and made to feel they belong. As schools grow larger, opportunities for participation also grow but not proportionately: a twenty-fold increase in population produces only a fivefold increase in participation opportunities.[11]

Curricular adequacy

Although it is assumed that large schools provide richer curricula than small schools, some studies show that this is not necessarily true. However, many small schools maintain programs that are comparable in quality to curricula of larger schools. In cases where deficiencies have existed, many small schools have achieved curricular adequacy through various restructuring efforts, including integration of curricula, innovative scheduling, higher education cooperatives, inter-district sharing, and use of instructional technologies.[12]

Efficiency

A 1996 study by Lee and Smith[13] found that large schools are actually more expensive per student because their sheer size requires more administrative support. Also, additional bureaucracy translates into less flexibility and innovation. A cost-benefit analysis of New York's small schools found them to be a good value, with "the quite small additional budgets . . . well worth the improved outputs."[14] When viewed on a cost-per-student-enrolled basis, they are somewhat more expensive, but when examined on the basis of the number of students they graduate, they are less expensive than either medium-sized or large high schools.

Adult connections

An important benefit of smaller schools is the closer connection students have with adults, making them less likely to fall through the cracks. In a 1996 article in *Educational Leadership*, former New York City high school principal Deborah Meier wrote that large schools breed anonymity, which, in turn, breeds anger, frustration, and a sense of disconnectedness. Data indicate that the smaller the school, the fewer incidents of violence, vandalism, and rudeness. Meier writes: "Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well

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[10] Stockard, J. and Mayberry, M. (1992). *Effective educational environments*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
[11] Cotton, Kathleen, *Affective and Social Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling*, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, December 1996.
[12] Roellke, Christopher, *Curriculum Adequacy and Quality in High Schools Enrolling Fewer Than 400 Pupils* (9-12), ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, December 1996.
[13] Lee, Valerie and Julia Smith, *High School Size: Which Works Best and for Whom?* Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Fall 1997, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 205-227.
[14] Stiefel, L., Latarola, P., Fruchter, N., and Berne, R. (1998). *The effects of size of student body on school costs and performance in New York City high schools*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University.

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by people who care for you."[15]

Parental support

In a 1997 Hudson Institute study of charter schools[16], 53 percent of parents cited small school size as the reason they chose a charter school for their child. It was the most frequent response, ahead of higher standards, education philosophy, greater parental involvement, and better teachers. Parents are more likely to form alliances with teachers who know their child and care about his or her progress.

Safety

In small school environments, strangers are easily spotted; teachers can respond quickly to student rudeness or frustration.[17]

Other benefits

The need in small schools for everyone's involvement in school activities appears to be related to other social and affective areas. People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Staff and students have a stronger sense of personal efficacy. Small school students tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. Learning activities are more likely to be individualized, classes are typically smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible.[18]

Instructors in small schools are more likely to form teacher teams, to integrate their subject matter content, employ multiage grouping and cooperative learning, and use performance assessments. Small schools also tend to emphasize learning that is experiential and relevant to the world outside of schools.[19]

Options to small schools

For school districts that find downsizing too expensive or disruptive, schools-within-schools, "house plans" where students and teachers remain together for some or all coursework, and their variations, are options districts may wish to consider.

For more information

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[15] Meier, Deborah, *The Big Benefits of Smallness*, Education Leadership. www.acsd.org/pubs/el/sep96/meier
[16] www.edexcellence.net/chart/chart1.htm
[17] Meier, Deborah, *The Big Benefits of Smallness*, Education Leadership. www.acsd.org/pubs/el/sep96/meier
[18] Cotton, Kathleen, *Affective and Social Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling*, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, December 1996.
[19] Ibid.

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